

REPORT ON A
FILMMAKING EXPERIENCE:
“CHILE WITH POEMS AND GUNS”

Lucha Film Collective

*Bill Bollinger, Donald Bray, Marjorie Bray, Mary Friedrichs, Nancy Hollander,
David Kunzle, Fredrick Kuretski, Phil Kuretski, Walter Locke, Deena Metzger,
Jack Michon*

Shortly after the coup of 11 September 1973 in Chile, nine people came together in the Los Angeles area to express their outrage on film: Seven were students and teachers who had been in Chile, two were politically committed filmmakers. The product of this union was the fifty-five-minute documentary “Chile with Poems and Guns”^{*} which reached several thousand international viewers during the first year after its release. Twice aired on Los Angeles television, the film was selected for distribution by Tricontinental Film Center. It also received scholarly notice, being included on the October 1974 program of the Pacific Coast Council of Latin American Studies at UCLA and the November meeting of the Latin American Studies Association in San Francisco.

In retrospect, the film happened because seven persons innocent of previous cinema experience were too naive to know it was *impossible* to do it and because two filmmakers had a vision that innocents *could* do it. The budget was a \$150 grant from a church source (costs of raw stock and processing would later be met by the sale of prints); the principal investment was thousands of person-hours of unpaid time. The objective fact of poverty demanded a “poverty aesthetic” which has the virtue of keeping analysis (message) more important than slickness. Poverty means do-it-yourself and for three months the production process dominated our lives, consumed every available moment, even pervaded our dreams. Because all of us were university based, we could turn to our audio-visual centers for material and technical assistance. These were indispensable as instructional resources whose possibilities we had not previously envisioned, and necessity quickly ended our inhibitions about saying, “I want instrument ‘X’. Could you show me how it works?”

We began with many late-night brainstorming sessions at the California State (Los Angeles) Latin American Center, developing film segments in vertical

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columns on a ten-foot-long double strip of butcher paper. Since many of us were strangers when we began, these discussions were the discovery of each other's politics: Nine differing and strongly held perspectives had to be blended into a single film statement. The need to agree forced an in-depth articulation of what we wanted to say in the film. When we scripted, it was immediately apparent that academically-sanctioned language would not go gracefully into celluloid; passive voice, conditional clauses, double negatives, and the like had to be ruthlessly suppressed in favor of direct, "hard-edge" wording. We also had to learn, as film narrators, to use our voices differently; we had to connect words with feelings in a way that was not required in everyday lecturing.

Yet the supreme challenge for the academician-as-filmmaker is to reset her mind to allow images to take precedence over words. It was astonishing to discover, for example, how crucial is the order or "collision" of images. To obtain the best possible images and to arrange them in the most effective way was, to be sure, only part of the enterprise. Film "magic" awaits the mixing of image with sound and idea. And that is the fascination: Multidimensional possibilities for creativity and communication that transcend ordinary scholarly pursuits.

Driven by the shared horror of what had happened to the Chile we loved, we managed the necessary containments of ego without throttling imagination. We reached our goal of collectivizing the whole filmmaking process: Everyone wrote, everyone designed shots, everyone edited; all major content decisions were by consensus. The two cinematographers among us had sufficient psychological muscle and collectivist consciousness not to be threatened by *letting* the rest of us be instant filmmakers on an equal footing with them. They believed, as we do now, that film will not be taken away from the strictures of corporate finance unless it is first demystified, unless the Hollywood hierarchical mystique is shattered. We owe this awareness to our Latin American sisters and brothers who created the Third Cinema.

"Chile with Poems and Guns" was, of course, not merely the work of a group of Southern Californians who now call themselves the Lucha Film Collective. There was the major input of the interviewees in the film, all of whom played themselves. All of the Chilean footage was done by an international team, some of whom have since been murdered by the Junta. One of the U.S. filmmakers involved, Charles Horman, was mysteriously killed in Santiago after learning from North American military officers the details of U.S. participation in the coup. The other North American returned home before the coup and as a member of the Lucha group generously contributed footage from the Allende period.

The task, to which Lucha committed itself in "Poems and Guns" and in its subsequent films, is to attempt to go beyond exposé and protest to give analytical tools and positive alternatives. We hope to set our audience in motion for we do not regard them as consumers, but as participants in the struggle for social justice.